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Other Worldly Glimpses

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OTHER
WORLDLY
GLIMPSES

By

Jordan Payeur

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

The Department of English

The School of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2020

Author's Note

For my honors project, I decided to develop my series of short stories to reflect the different types of worlds that are built within the fantasy genre. Modernly, the terms “low fantasy” and “high fantasy” have begun to be defined as the subgenres of fantasy. These two terms have been debated, some writers and/or readers having slightly different opinions on what each encompasses. In general, low fantasy is defined as a world in which there are fantastical elements, but the story takes place within the world we live. High fantasy, on the other hand, is a world imagined by the author, entirely separate from our world (though there are various things within these other worlds that may resemble ours).

The first short story in this series, “What a Life”, is a modern fairytale that represents the more tradition fantasy genre. This story is the most realistic, taking place in the real world with a single magical element. The second story in this series, “Chasing Approval”, is my interpretation of low fantasy, taking place within our world but including a secret, magical society hidden within the normal world. The third story, “Dagger of Deviation” is my interpretation of high fantasy, the tale taking place in a world completely separate from ours. Since modern fantasy is often long-length fiction, these low fantasy and high fantasy short stories, despite being able to stand alone, reflect more developed worlds that have been condensed to only include aspects of the world vital for the tale given. With these three stories in this particular order, I have created a series that represents the varying degrees of fantasy worlds.

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What A Life

Part 1

Pamela stands in the cold November night, watching her breath puff out in clouds. Behind her she can hear the giggles and hardy talk of drunk people that stand inside the alley to smoke. She can feel the heat from the club radiating from the front door behind her, enticing her to enter and order a bourbon neat—but Rita insists she wait outside the club for her.

Pamela shivers in her peacoat just as a chorus of laughter erupts from the group behind her. Two of the girls are talking too loudly about one of their weddings and the guy is shouting over the two about how he needs to call his husband because *you know he's always worrying*.

This is why she hates going out to these clubs and bars with her sister. Seeing people so successful, happy, enjoying life—when her life was put on hold eight years ago so she could take care of her mother, it never really started up again. If only she could have done what Rita did, deciding to finish college and strive for a meaningful life, despite their dying mother.

“Excuse me, sugar.”

Pamela nearly jumps out of her skin at the voice so close to her side.

Turning abruptly, she looks down at a hunched over, wrinkled woman bundled up in an old gray trench coat and tattered black gloves. The woman smiles up at her, displaying her mouth full of pink gums, no teeth in sight.

“Do you have a smoke for an old lady to warm up with, dear?”

“A smoke?” Pamela takes a moment to process what the old woman is saying and then shakes her head. “Oh, sorry, I don't smoke.”

The old woman doesn't disappear back into the night as suddenly as she appeared. Instead, she slants her head in thought, her tiny gray bun bobbing in the air. “What's eating you, honey?”

Pamela lets out a small laugh, a cloud of heat rushing out of her mouth. “I'm just wishing I was someone else.” That admission shocks even Pamela, though she has prided herself on always trying to be honest. That's what she's being: honest. How can anyone who has wasted nearly a decade of her life, her youthful twenties, not want to be someone else?

“Don't fret,” the old woman croons, suddenly digging into her pocket. What she pulls out of her pocket gleams in the light over the club door. Pamela follows the thin golden chain down to a rose charm. “I've been looking for you.”

“Oh, ma'am, sorry, I could never...take something...it's yours, sorry, no...” Pamela tries to decline the old woman, shocked to receive such a generous offer. She glances behind the old woman, hoping to see her sister's silver Elantra rolling down the street.

“It's not an offer,” the old woman laughs, her voice tinkling like wind chimes. “It's already yours! If you accept this, you can have exactly what you desire.”

Another denial sits on Pamela's tongue, but the way the gold seems to twinkle in the dim lighting of the club, sticking out in the deep darkness of the night and seemingly omitting a glow of its own, entices Pamela more than the most potent, risk-free drug.

Reaching out, Pamela takes the delicate chain in her hand, thanking the woman like she would thank a loved one on Christmas morning.

The old woman grins at her as Pamela unfastens the clasp of the necklace and places it around her neck, letting the cool metal rest at her collarbone. Looking down at the old woman, Pamela begins to grow uncomfortable with the gummy grin baring into her.

“Oh, there's your sister,” the old woman croons suddenly, her eyes lighting up.

Pamela spins around to see her sister, Rita, walking down the sidewalk, her heels clicking against the stones. “I decided to park around the corner. I hate fitting down these tight one-ways. The last thing I need is to get sued because I bumped a drunk stumbling out of a dark alley.”

Rita walks into the club, leaving her sister in the dust. Pamela spins around to thank the old lady again, touching the necklace dangling around her collarbone. She's taken aback when all she sees is the cold stones of the sidewalk behind her.

An hour later, Pamela finds herself sitting in the stuffy club, still playing with the necklace around her neck, as she listens to her sister babble on about the surprise party she *knows* Pamela and her husband Dave are throwing for her—which isn't happening because Pamela can't think of anything worse than using her free time to plan her pampered sister's party with the brother-in-law she can't stand. Not that she hates Rita. No, she loves her sister—she just hates her sister's perfect husband, perfect son, perfect job and house, even her perfect Pomeranian.

Rita asks a question and then sits there staring at Pamela, waiting for an answer. Pamela blushes, realizing she didn't hear the question, and sips her drink to put off the embarrassment of having to admit she wasn't listening. Thankfully, she is saved by the lights dimming, signaling the beginning of the show.

“Please welcome to the stage, Thalia Hamilton,” the host of tonight's karaoke night says, standing there in a cheap suit and bowtie. Once he gets the attention of the crowd, he dances off the stage.

The woman who climbs onto the stage and begins singing Whitney Houston's “I Want To Dance with Somebody” quiets down the room. She's singing too deeply to mimic Houston, but Pamela becomes entranced by the woman—hair up in a messy blonde bun, wearing jeans and red high heels, a silver wedding band around her finger. Immediately Pamela gets the impression that this woman, unlike the others who have drunkenly stumbled into the spotlight on past karaoke nights, wants to be the center of attention.

“I should be getting home,” Rita says, just as the woman finishes her number. “Oliver has a violin recital tomorrow morning. Why they do those things so early is beyond me.”

Pamela slides out of her hard stool as another karaoke singer stumbles onto the stage. “I'll be right back, Rita.”

Rita mumbles something about being annoyed, but Pamela ignores her sister's complaint and heads across the club. She reaches the bar just as the bartender is sliding a

glass of red wine towards Thalia Hamilton, who has taken off her heels and is standing barefoot on the dirty floor.

“Hi,” Pamela says and then feels herself blush. She suddenly feels overdressed in the black cocktail dress and heeled boots she's had collecting dust in her closet.

Thalia's blue eyes peel away from the glass to look at the woman beside her. “Do I know you?”

“Uh...no, sorry, we've never met...” Pamela gets all choked up, ready to stumble over her well-practiced apology, with an underlying apology for existing, and skitter off. But something about Thalia has entranced her so much that she swallows back her shyness and clears her throat. “You just seemed so confident up there, Mrs. Hamilton.”

Thalia takes a sip of her wine, swishing it around in her mouth before swallowing as she examines Pamela's slumped shoulders and knobby knees. “I like to sing.”

Pamela blushes and nods. “Of course, and you're great at it! I was just wondering...well, you must have such an amazing life. You're so happy.”

“That's presumptuous of you,” Thalia says brashly, leaning on the barstool to slip back on her heels. “Now, if you'd excuse me, I have to go fix my lipstick before I go home to my husband, who *won't* listen to how exciting ladies' night was.”

Pamela wants to open her mouth to stop Thalia from leaving, to tell the woman she yearns to understand the confidence she expresses. She wants to know how to be so happy, confidently beautiful, brave. Instead, clutching the gift hanging around her neck like a lifeline, she watches Thalia walk across the room, pulling out the messy bun as she heads for the bathroom.

Pamela's eyes begin to sting, a gut-wrenching sadness overtaking her. *To be somebody like that*, Pamela thinks as she traces the delicate rose charm, *is the most amazing life*.

Part 2

Pamela's first thought before she opens her eyes the next morning is absolutely hating the idea of going to the nursing home (the same place her mother passed away) this afternoon to work the night shift. Rolling over, she stuffs her face into the soft silk of the pillowcase under her.

And just as quickly as she folded into the bed, she bolts up, looking around frantically. She doesn't have blue silk sheets or a memory foam mattress. Glancing around the room, she's automatically overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of everything—the crystal lamps on the night stands, a huge flat-screen mounted on the wall over matching dark oak dressers, and plush blue carpeting that looks soft enough to nap on covering the floor.

“Hey, babe.” A man walks out of a doorway beside the bed, buttoning up the cuffs of his expensive looking blue suit. He looks down at her with captivating hazel eyes and leans down to peck her on the forehead. “I'm running late. Tell the kids I'll see them later!”

With that, Adam disappears through the door across from the bed and a moment later she hears a door close beneath her. *Adam*. Pamela didn't recognize the man at all,

but somehow, she knows his name, knows who he is suddenly, like she's known him for years.

Jumping out of the bed, Pamela runs into the room where Adam appeared from minutes before. The motion-activated lights turn on when she enters, and she knows before she sees the room that it's a bathroom with a walk-in shower and a double sink with marble tops.

Pamela stares at herself in the mirror, shaking when she sees *not herself*. Her hands are wobbling as she reaches up to touch the blonde mess of curls, shining skin, and piercing blue eyes.

Thalia Hamilton. And just like that Pamela knows who she is—not herself, but this other woman, who is now all of the sudden familiar to her. She knows Thalia has two sisters, two dead parents, an older son and a young daughter, a CEO husband, and a life of luxury.

The shaking in her body stops and Pamela is aware that she is in someone else's body—it's not possible, but it's as real as when she was herself yesterday. Suddenly, she feels amazing.

Pulling on a yellow blouse and white slacks from Thalia's closet, Pamela goes downstairs to the spacious kitchen to make the kids breakfast. She can't stop thinking about how incredible it is that she has a family of her own.

Making a mess of the Hamilton's stainless-steel sink and fridge, Pamela makes the first batch of pancakes she's made in years—she wouldn't have bothered making them for herself alone. Setting the table with matching white plates, decorated with little blue

flowers lining the outer ring, Pamela sets out the pancakes and syrup for the kids. As if she timed it perfectly, she hears little feet padding down the stairs.

Thalia's seven-year-old daughter, Maxine, walks into the kitchen, reflecting her mother's blonde curls and blue-eyed beauty. She immediately reminds Pamela of one of the antique porcelain dolls her mother used to collect—the ones that now sit on a shelf in the basement collecting dust.

“Pancakes!” Pamela exclaims, hoping to light up the child's face.

Instead, Maxine drops her sparkling pink backpack near the doorway and walks past her mother to the pantry in the corner of the room. She walks back out with a silver package clutched in her hand.

“I just want my strawberry pop-tart, Mom,” Maxine says dismissively, grabbing her backpack and trotting back out of the room.

Pamela's spirits drop slightly, hurt by the coldness of the child's behavior, but something inside her is telling her that Thalia wouldn't be surprised. In fact, Thalia wouldn't have bothered to go through the effort at all.

“Mom.” Kyle, Thalia's twelve-year-old son, walks in with Beats framing his head and an iPhone gripped in his hand. “Muhammad invited us over for games and snacks after school. So, I'm going to need a ride home around six, okay?”

Pamela grins at the boy and motions towards the table. “Sure, honey. Want some pancakes?”

Kyle blinks at the table and then takes his headphones off to glare at his mother skeptically. “Everything okay? You and dad have another fight?”

“No,” Pamela tells him. She wonders if Thalia and her husband fight often, but something in the back of her mind, the part that knows Thalia instead of Pamela, tells her the son's defensive behavior is the norm. “I just wanted you to have some warm food in your belly.”

Kyle doesn't look like he believes his mother as he replaces the headphones back over his ears. “I've got to go catch the bus.”

“I can drive you!” she yells after him with no reply.

A minute later she hears a door close. Walking through the living room, which is decked out in luxurious looking white couches and a gray stone fireplace, she pushes back the thick purple curtains to peek out over the white picket fence. Thalia's two kids are standing at the curb. She witnesses the school bus pull up and whisk the two children away to the other side of town.

Leaning on the back of the couch in front of the window, Pamela attempts to take in her surroundings. She isn't her anymore; she's a rich, healthy, trophy wife. There can't be anything more she could ask for, right? Losing her sister and the pitiful number of friends she has, most of whom work at the same nursing home she does, barely kisses her imagination.

However, this house, knowing it is only her inside it, feels awfully large. While the luxury and sophistication of this lifestyle is breathtaking, suddenly Pamela is aware of why Thalia needs her getaway nights to a cheap karaoke club downtown. It's all so overwhelming.

Chewing on Thalia's soft bottom lip, Pamela looks down at the round glass side table by the couch with a Louis Vuitton purse resting there. Reaching in, she pulls out the Prada wallet and unclasps it to reveal a row of credit cards.

Slipping on the red heels Thalia was wearing at the club last night, Pamela grabs the keys to the Buick Envision sitting behind one of the three doors to the garage and leaves the stack of pancakes on the kitchen table to grow cold.

Leaning back against the thick wood of the dining room table, Pamela sips the red wine from the Hamilton's crystal glass and contemplates the events of her day. She's wearing the soft, slimming red dress she bought this afternoon after her breakfast of latte. The house is filled with the aroma of the duck roasting in the oven and the carrots steaming on the stove top.

Live life to the fullest, Pamela has been telling herself all day. She has to be completely gifted to have gotten a chance at a lifestyle such as this, and she doesn't intend to waste it. She's been working for hours to make everything just right for when Adam comes home from working all day. If Thalia and Adam's relationship is strained, Pamela is determined to mend it.

Upstairs she can hear the soft whisper of the kids' TVs playing—she had sent them up to their rooms after loading them up with soda and pizza.

The timer for the oven goes off and Pamela gets up from the table to take the duck out of the oven. Placing it on the end of the long dining room table, where she has set two placements, she goes back into the kitchen to pour the carrots into a serving dish.

As if Adam was on a timer as well, the front door across the house opens just as she is placing the dish onto the soft, white tablecloth. Taking one last sip of her wine, Pamela leaves the dining room to greet *her* husband.

Walking out into the living room, she patiently waits as Adam kicks his shoes off at the door, drops his briefcase off by her purse, and loosens the blue striped tie around his collar.

“How was your day?” Pamela asks.

“Crap,” Adam says gruffly, and Pamela is immediately startled by the tone change since this morning. “Marcus got on my ass again about that proposal, as if it's possible to finish something like that in less than a week. I worked through lunch, but that still wasn't good enough for him.”

As Adam continues talking, he walks around her and into the kitchen, leaving his wife to trail behind him. He grabs a beer out of the fridge and twists the top off. He attempts to throw the top into the sink but misses, the metal bottle cap scrapping against the countertop.

“I made dinner,” Pamela says cheerfully, hoping that might brighten his spirits.

Instead, Adam frown at the empty pot sitting on the table, where the carrots were cooking, and then glances up at her. “I smelled pizza when I walked in, kind of wanted that.”

“I ordered pizza for the kids,” she explains, motioning towards the swinging door that leads to the dining room. “For us, I made duck. And carrots.”

“No mashed potatoes?” he asks, pushing the door to the dining room open and walking inside.

Pamela feels a sudden wave of embarrassment, realizing what Thalia knows about her husband too late—the man always wants mashed potatoes with every home cooked meal. Thalia even made them for him with grilled salmon before.

“No, I’m sorry, I didn’t have time. I had to pick Kyle up from his friend’s house,” she explains, clasping her hands together as he takes in the cooked food, set table, wine bottle and glasses. She had forgotten to light the candles in holders centering the table.

Then, to further Pamela’s shock, Adam looks up to survey his wife and laughs at her. Then he rounds the table, bumping into the chair heading the table as he goes, to stand over her. Looking into the eyes she found so beautiful this morning, Pamela realizes that his gaze is somewhat glossed over, and his pupils are a centimeter or two wider than is normal.

Pamela knows the look well, remembering an almost forgotten boyfriend from high school. *He’s high*, she thinks, *but how can that be?* He’s successful, happy, rich—people like that don’t need an escape.

Adam leans over, still holding his wife’s gaze, and digs his fingers into the center of the duck breast. She watches him stuff the piece of meat into his mouth, chewing with his mouth open so she can witness the loose herbs getting lodged in between his teeth. “It’s dry.”

Her face is completely heated from disgust and shame now, but Pamela puts Thalia’s hands on her hips and glares at the man. “I did all this especially for you!”

Adam laughs hardily, spewing duck breath into her face. “You think this would make up for your behavior? Please, Lia. I swear, if every housewife threw a fit when her husband screwed his intern, the world would be in shambles. Get over yourself.” With that, he grabs the bottle of wine off the table and leaves the room.

Pamela is shocked to her core, but she realizes not so much from his words rather than for the fact that deep down she knows Thalia—the real Thalia—wouldn't have been upset at all. That reaction is quite average, actually, she realizes. That is how their relationship has been for years, even before Maxine was born.

The world might not be in shambles, but this family is.

Leaving the uneaten meal on the table, she walks out into the living room and drops herself down on the couch just as the door to the master bedroom cracks closed abruptly. Rubbing her eyes, Pamela considers the day. The shopping and lack of hard work was exciting, to a fault, but what luxury is worth a life of loveless relationships?

At least Rita and I love each other, she thinks bitterly. And that's when Pamela realizes, for the first time since she became Thalia, that all she wants is to be herself again. What a shock, to want to be a person whose life she loathed. She's even beginning to miss the old folks' home, where at least her friends are happy to see her, and where the seniors appreciate her work.

How did this happen to me? she wonders, relaxing into the couch. *What changed?* *My yearning to be Thalia?* That couldn't be the case—she's wished to be a dozen different people and no amount of wishing to be those people transported her into another body.

The necklace! Of course. Playing the events of the previous night in her head, Pamela realizes the only difference from every other night out was that old lady handing her the rose necklace. She reaches out and rubs the smooth skin of Thalia's bare neck.

It must still be on my neck, she decides—or rather, it has to be on the real Pamela. Without even attempting to further try to talk herself into enjoying Thalia's life, she gets up and grabs the keys to the car she loved driving today—but would be perfectly fine never setting foot in again after tonight.

Part 3

Pamela realizes that parking an expensive Buick outside her mom's old townhouse might turn some heads, but she is too rushed to care. Leaving the keys in the ignition of the car, she heads up the concrete steps leading up to the front door. Leaning down into the bushes in the front yard, she pulls the head off one of the gnomes and grabs the key hidden within the body.

Walking into the cramped kitchen, Pamela is overwhelmed with the comfort it brings her. The only new item in the room is the fridge, the one thing Pamela has needed to replace since her mother's passing. The tea kettle full of water sits on the table, waiting for Pamela to make her nightly chamomile concoction to help her sleep.

Being quiet, not knowing where her own body might be, she enters the living room. There are two floral couches sitting in a perfect ninety-degree angle across from the entertainment center, the outdated TV resting on top. Pamela gets an urge to bury herself in the mountain of throw pillows her mother had collected over the years.

Her eye catches the photograph she framed and placed on the side table by the loveseat only a few months prior. Within the picture is herself and three of the CNAs she works with. Margaret, who is just about as shy and reserved as she is. Louise, who is retiring in the spring. And Vanessa, who invites Pamela to every one of her kids' birthday parties. Sitting in a wheelchair in front of the four smiling women in the photograph is Grace Samson.

Pamela remembers how much of a nightmare Grace was when she first entered the nursing home—swearing at the workers, refusing to eat the food or take her medication, screaming so loud in her sleep that she woke the other residences. But as time went on, Pamela grew to care for Grace, learning that she had to live through her husband getting life in prison for murdering his boss in 1942 (they assume because he lost his mind), and then losing her only son to cancer when he was a teenager. Grace had inherited enough money to live in comfort when her father had died, but she had already lost everything she cared about by then.

Live life to the fullest. Before you know it, it'll be here and gone, Grace had whispered to Pamela one night, half asleep, like she was already dead.

A soft shuffle of feet finally pulls Pamela's attention from Grace's worn out face. Creeping silently across the living room, she nudges the cracked door of her mother's bedroom open. Her room is on the top floor, covered in books and clearly lived in. Her mother's bedroom has remained the same since she was moved into the nursing home, years before she died—the room has a neatly made twin bed with two dressers, a full

length mirror (her mother loved to check and double check how she looked before leaving the house), and a woman standing by the bed.

It's a surreal experience for Pamela to watch herself through someone else's eyes. She hadn't worn those skinny jeans in a while, and she notices that they still look good on her. Her hair was always tightly wound up, but now it hangs loosely at her shoulders.

"Thalia." The sound of her voice makes the young woman jump and drop the pill bottle she had been examining off the side table. She turns, eyes big and brown, to take in her own body standing in the doorway to the bedroom.

Finally, once she has taken a moment to examine the person across the room, she seems to regain control. "Pamela, right? I was really freaked out this morning when I woke up in this dump."

"I'm sorry," Pamela says, trying to grasp the concept that she is talking to the person whose body she is currently possessing and who is within her own body. "I think this whole mess up was my fault. But I think we can fix this, return to our own bodies and lives. We just need to—"

"It wasn't as glamorous as you thought, huh?" Thalia cuts Pamela off, smirking at her like one of those bad actors playing a cheesy super villain role. "I'll admit, I was freaked out when I woke up here this morning. But then I realized I have all the freedom to do what I want, go where I want, live how I want. It's a breath of fresh air; it feels like I've gotten years of my life back!"

"But...it's my life," Pamela croaks.

Thalia shrugs Pamela's thin shoulder, tossing the pill bottle in her hand to the bed. "Not anymore, sweetheart. You wanted the luxurious life, and now you've got it. No need to thank me."

Pamela feels tears threaten to spill out of Thalia's crystal blue eyes and begins to shake. She looks down at the collarbone that used to be hers and notices the rose charm still resting there. "What about your family? Your kids?"

"You spent a day in my life," Thalia exclaims, throwing Pamela's hands up in the air, "so you know my kids are nearly as terrible as their asshole father, or at least they will be someday. I never wanted kids; I wanted to be a model, but Adam had to have his perfect, cookie cutter lifestyle. Look how happy that made him."

"My life isn't yours to have," Pamela decides, trying to be firm.

"And mine wasn't yours, but you took it because you thought you wanted it. Well, now it's yours. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did." Thalia rolls Pamela's eyes then, turning to observe her new body in the mirror. "I don't know how you did it, and I don't care. Hey, are you a witch? That would seriously top this thing off, if I had magical powers or something."

"I'm not a magical being, I'm a woman with a family and friends who care about me!" Pamela snaps, startled at the sudden realization that her life isn't as terrible as she thought; it might not be what she has always imagined a perfect life would be, but she has a sister and nephew she enjoys seeing happy, and friends she anticipates seeing at work daily.

“Shame,” is all Thalia says, turning to observe her own body with a frown, maybe contemplating if having a new life is worth losing her perfect figure. “Are we done here? I’m going to buy a Greyhound ticket to Hollywood and see if anyone thinks you’re pretty enough to model. Or do porn—I’ll take what I can get at this point.”

I want my life back, Pamela thinks, telling herself with complete certainty now that she no longer has the slightest desire to be Thalia Hamilton. At least as herself she can find happiness in the simplicity of it, rather than wincing from the blows of having to be a perfect housewife to a devil and his spawns.

“Thalia, please,” Pamela pleads with the other woman, hesitating. What will persuade this woman? She might be confident, but she’s as cruel as her lifestyle as forced her to be. What could Pamela say to make her trade a life of freedom for what she was trapped in before?

Then, Pamela realizes something key to solving her problem. She considers what Thalia was just saying, asking how Pamela pulled this off.

She doesn't know how this happened! Pamela realizes. *But I have a pretty good idea.*

“Please, Thalia, if I can’t have myself back,” she raises her hand to point at the delicate charm resting on her own collarbone, “can I at least have my mother’s necklace? She gave it to me before she died, and it means a lot to me.”

Thalia hesitates, reaching up a hand to trace the thin gold chain around her neck. “Won’t people realize if you aren’t wearing it anymore?”

“I don't wear it all the time, just when I'm feeling anxious,” Pamela says, the lie rolling off her tongue with ease. “If someone does notice, you can just tell people I lost it.”

Thalia purses Pamela's thin lips, but shrugs in disregard and reaches behind her head. Unclasping the necklace, she holds it out by the thin chain to hand to Pamela.

Can I change Thalia's life? Pamela wonders as she watches the rose dangle there. *She's rich and beautiful, it's possible I could make her life a happy one, too. Right?*

She nearly changes her mind right then, deciding she could be Thalia Hamilton if she tried hard enough. But, then, just as quickly, she realizes she can never be Thalia Hamilton—she isn't cold enough, selfish enough, spoiled enough, to be Thalia Hamilton. And though she thought so, she isn't unhappy enough to pull off being Thalia Hamilton.

Reaching out, Pamela grabs the rose charm dangling from her own hand—the hand she now wants back fiercely—and wishes, more than anything else she could ever ask for, to be herself.

It only takes one blink of the eye. Abruptly Pamela finds herself standing by the bed, looking at Thalia Hamilton standing there still in the red cocktail dress and heels. Thalia's eyes grow wide and wild with rage.

“NO!” she snaps, but it sounds strangled and desperate. “You tricked me!”

Holding out her hands, Thalia looks down at two empty palms, the necklace no longer clutched in one of them.

As Thalia drops to the floor to pat at the old, thin gray carpeting of the bedroom, Pamela rubs her neck and collarbone, which is smooth and empty of any jewelry. She

knows, somehow, that Thalia won't find it in the carpeting. The chance of being someone other than who they are is gone, an opportunity in the past.

"I'm going to be late for work," Pamela announces, aware that she had told Margaret she would cover her graveyard shift, eight p.m. to six a.m.

And she is aware that she cares if she isn't at work. She cares about covering Margaret's shift and seeing the old janitor Marvin who likes to talk about his two daughters to no end. She cares about calming Grace when she screams out into the middle of the night.

Looking down at the woman still sitting on the floor, Pamela can tell by the slumped posture and spaced out look of Thalia that she has given up. On finding the necklace, on having a different life, perhaps even on her own life.

"You know, Thalia, the only thing you have to be is yourself. Everything else life has to offer is up to you," Pamela says, having already taught herself that lesson.

Ten minutes later, Pamela is dressing in her Looney Tunes scrubs upstairs in her bedroom when she hears the front door close and Thalia's Buick start up at the curb. Just like that, they are both back to their lives. Though, Pamela knows she can do anything she wants to do with her life, she feels confident she is content in being who she has been. Thalia, on the other hand, Pamela hopes will decide the opposite.

Chasing Approval

He seems so normal, Hera admits.

In the human world, all monsters and demons appear as people. But that doesn't change what they are beneath the skin.

Hera weaves around people on the cramped, narrow sidewalk. People grumble and whisper annoyances at her as she steps in front of them, trying to get a better view. About twenty paces ahead of her, barely visible through the early morning commuters clustering the sidewalk, is the man who goes by Oscar Davies. He has dirty blonde hair and light eyes, like a majority of the population of England, and is wearing a tailored blue suit that is nearly identical to the black one he wore the previous day.

Hera stops and pretends to be interested in the magazine kiosk on the corner of the street as Davies goes into his usual Starbucks and walks out with a small paper coffee cup clutched in his hand. *He did the same thing yesterday*, Hera recalls, remembering him stopping in the same store before walking up the street to his office.

She waits until he is a few paces around the corner before continuing her stalking, walking around a family of three and nearly knocking over a toddler to keep her sight on Davies. The sidewalk is wider on this street and Hera can more easily make out the thin shoulder blades sticking out through the back of Davies' jacket. *Odd of him not to be wearing an overcoat*. She's already chilled to the bone from the early Spring chill and the drizzle of rain falling from the sky.

Other than that, though, Davies seems like any other busy Londoner, hurrying into the tall building centering the side of the street dotted with offices. No one would guess there's a monster that lurks beneath his skin.

But the Custos are almost never wrong. For months they've suspected Davies of the murders committed after hours in the Underground, equaling up to six bodies now. And there was that woman who vanished from the conference he attended in Stratford a few months back—Hera's own sector, back in the States, were asked to investigate that case, but the trail grew cold before they could track down the demon.

These are no regular murders, though. There is no evidence left of the crime, not even the body, except for remnants of magic indicating an assault on a human by a powerful demon. Normal human cops wouldn't have been able to spot anything out of the ordinary—in fact, they wouldn't even be able to locate the crime scene. However, the magic the Custos have coursing through their seemingly human bodies give them the ability to pick up on these crime scenes.

Hera waits outside the office for a minute, trying to stay out of the way by leaning against a light post. She almost expects Davies to creep back out and scurry off to commit some heinous act—but she knows, based on previous investigation done by the London sector, that Davies never misses a day of work.

Turning around, Hera enters the same coffee shop she did the day before. Ordering a cup of black tea with a splash of milk, she sits by the window of the small shop. With the backpack, notebook, and laptop she has on display, she looks just like any of the other college students that dot this area of the city.

Opening up her laptop, Hera reviews the digital file the Custos London sector had compiled and sent to the States, asking for more hands on deck. The case file consists of surveillance they did on Davies, including his whereabouts around the times of the murders. One was done near the Piccadilly Line a few hours before Davies showed up with a couple of work pals at a pub. Another was done barely an hour after Davies left a rehearsal for his cousin's wedding—so on and so forth, each incident more convenient than the last.

Flipping through the paper copies she has on Davies, Hera examines the surveillance done before she took on the case. The only abnormality to his schedule lately is that he used to take a train into Oxford every couple of weeks to see his girlfriend Mary-Jane, her alternating every other week to visit him in London. He hasn't gone to Oxford in over a month. The local Custos reported she has recently been reported missing. The last time she went to London was just over two weeks ago, but looking into her financials proved she did buy a ticket back to Oxford a couple days before she was reported missing.

Did he eat his own girlfriend? Hera wonders, examining the missing report Mary-Jane's sister filled out to the local police. But it's been a few weeks since he saw her last and she's only been reported missing for a couple weeks; maybe they broke up and her disappearance is just another coincidence.

Shoving the reports aside with a sigh, Hera drags her laptop across the table.

She is staring at the profiles Davies has on social media for the fifth time (all of them just as boring as his daily routine) when she sees someone drop into the other chair

at her table across from her. Suspecting it to be another student, with a King's College logo t-shirt and some boring small talk prepared for her, she opens her mouth to shoo the stranger away.

Her words fall short when she looks into her Uncle Mauvis' light green eyes—the same ones she got from her mother and hers before her.

“What are you doing here?” she demands, closing the laptop halfway to get a better view of him.

Mauvis throws a long, thin leg over a knee and sips at the teacup sitting in front of him. “London is a lovely city this time of year. And they have good tea.”

“You hate big cities,” Hera accuses, glaring at him as his thin lips spread into a smirk.

“But I like tea.”

She continues to glare across from him as he tucks the thin emerald scarf deeper into his cashmere sweater and takes another sip of his tea. Finally, he leans forward, placing his hands on the table in front of him—both dotted with rings of different metals and designs—and changes to a more serious tone. “You know your mother assumes you aren't capable of dealing with a case on your own. If you have a witness, your mother can't accuse you of acquiring help and not being able to finish a case on your own.”

Hera finishes closing the laptop and fiddles with her own teacup, already long empty. It wouldn't surprise her if her mother tried to find a way to deny her solo work on easy cases later down the road. She doesn't think Hera is capable of doing anything by

herself—before she left her mother even went through her suitcase to comment on her choice of attire.

Not enough appropriate jackets, her mother had decided, snapping the suitcase closed.

“So, you're checking up on me,” she replies at last, not falling for her uncle's I'm-here-as-a-friend bit.

“Is it so bad for an uncle to worry about his niece?” He takes another sip of his tea. “Working cases alone could be challenging for any hunter, especially a novice one.”

The word *novice* stings, considering Hera has been a hunter since she graduated Academy four years ago, and has been training to be one since she was thirteen. “How would you know? You're not even a hunter,” she snaps.

A low blow, for sure. It isn't odd to not be a hunter in the Custos world, but in her family—one of the prestigious families—it's certainly looked down upon. Mauvis owns and runs an art gallery back home in the Black City. And just as he has always been looked down upon by his family, Hera has always been demeaned by her mother (though she hasn't been able to figure out the reason for her mother's lack of faith in her). Her uncle used to fight with her mother, tell her she needed to let Hera learn what it was like to be a guardian, without her mother breathing down her neck.

He's always called her strong. But now he's here, checking up on her, proving he thinks she is as incapable as her mother does. The disappointment in her uncle's lack of faith in her hits hard, causing her chest to tighten painfully.

“You know if I didn't come here and check up on your progress, your mother was going to send another guardian after you to be a babysitter,” Mauvis says, unfazed by his niece's temper.

Hera leans back in her seat, the thin metal chair groaning behind her. She clenches her jaw and watches the cars go by on the street. “I've only been here for a couple days.”

“And you didn't check in,” he replies, tapping his boat shoe against the leg of the table. “Which means you don't have anything yet.”

“Davies hasn't slipped up,” Hera snaps again, glaring at the tall building across the street. It's newer than the other buildings in the area, most of the outside of the building glass. “He didn't go anywhere last night. Just work, home, sleep, repeat.”

“Maybe the London sector has the wrong guy,” Mauvis suggests.

He has no right to accuse them of doing a bad job, Hera thinks bitterly, but bites her lip and sneaks a look at her uncle's face.

And the look of concern on it. *He's not here for my mother,* Hera decides, feeling foolish for pushing away the one person who has always believed in her.

Sighing, she pulls the dark hair hanging in her eyes back and reopens her laptop. She pulls up the documents sent to her by the London sector and turns the screen for her uncle to see. “This is all they have. He prefers women victims, but he's attacked a couple guys, too.”

Mauvis smiles at her, a knowing glow in his eye he always has when he calms her temper. Without saying anything to match his snarky look, he pulls his reading glasses

out of his pocket and reads the screen, reaching over to scroll through the measly evidence.

“The only evidence of demonic activity was...fecal matter?” he questions, giving the screen a dirty look.

“Fecal matter that was already half disintegrated, with bits of human remains and sulfur inside,” Hera replies. Any residue from demons in the mortal world quickly dissolves, going back to the dimension in which the demon belongs—whether it be fecal matter, hair, blood, skin.

“The attack in Stratford had hair as well?”

Hera nods. “They documented that it was black and velvety. There were only a few hairs, like the demon was shedding.” She leans back in her seat and shrugs. “It doesn't fit any characteristics of beings I've tracked before.”

“The bones in the fecal matter from the attack last week had deep gouges in them?”

“Yeah, they think it was claws.”

Mauvis glances up at Hera and lowers his glasses. “What do you think?”

Hera furrows her brow. “Well, there's only so much the marks could be. Claws, teeth, maybe a small weapon if it's a more advanced demon with human-like abilities. So, probably claws or teeth.”

Mauvis pulls his phone out of his coat pocket and begins scrolling. Hera is about two seconds away from bursting with impatience when he turns his screen towards her and slides it across the table.

Hera picks it up, examining the photo displayed. It's a picture of a painting, clearly one of the framed ones in his gallery. It's mostly in shades of gray and black. There is a thick, stocky creature in the center of the picture with black holes for eyes, a slithery, snake-looking tail poking out from underneath. In the center of its face is the only remaining white left on the canvas, strikingly prominent with thin, pointed ends: the creature's teeth.

“What is it?” she asks, almost embarrassed not knowing.

“A *mus*,” he replies as he takes his phone back.

“It's a rat demon?” Hera grimaces, remembering her basic Latin classes from Academy.

“Called that because of their rodent-like appearance,” Mauvis confirms, finishing off his tea before continuing. “They come from a hole of a dimension—a dark, foul place filled with all kinds of instinct-driven, primitive creatures. They're rare now, since they were hunted ruthlessly in the early eighteen hundreds when they were a real nuisance for the Custos guardians.”

“Maybe they've begun to resurface, figuring we've forgotten about them,” Hera speculates.

Mauvis inclines an eyebrow at her. “Well, it wasn't your first or second guess, was it? So, maybe we did forget about them; the Custos tend to let lesser demons slip through the cracks because they're too busy frying bigger fish.”

Hera doesn't like the way her uncle talks down about Custos leaders, but he has a point. Guardians are more concerned with mass killings and more powerful demons than a rodent chomping down on a few late-night pub stragglers.

“Looks like you have some research to do,” Mauvis says, standing up from his chair. He readjusts his scarf once more and winks. “I've got an old friend to see while I'm in town.”

Waving at him dismissively as he leaves the cafe, Hera turns her laptop back towards her and begins reviewing the evidence from the attacks with this fresh lead in mind. A *mus* is a perfectly reasonable suspect; lesser demons like them leave traces of sulfur behind a lot. They aren't as careful as some other demons are in covering their tracks. In fact, more primitive demons rarely even think enough to cover their tracks. But most demons like *mus* can't transform their appearance.

Which means either there is a *mus* slithering around under the city right now and Oscar Davies whereabouts are an unfortunate coincidence, or Uncle Mauvis is wrong and, in that case, she still isn't any closer to closing this case.

Grumbling to herself, Hera shuts her laptop and begins packing her things up. If she is going to get any further, she needs to reference the demonology books she's got back at her hotel room. If she stays here and sits on Davies, she fears she won't get any further by tomorrow. Deciding to come back and tail Davies once he gets out at five, she heads out with her hopes high that she'll find the information she needs.

After reading the same passage in her demonology book for the thousandth time, Hera groans and lays back on the plush sheets of her hotel bed. The section on *mus* only tells her what she already knows: they strongly resemble a giant rat, completely devour their human victims, and often leave fecal matter at their attack sites.

Her cell beeps on the side table. Rolling over, she grabs it and reads the message from her mother.

Update?

Hera groans again and drops the cellphone onto the covers beside her. She doesn't even know what a good lie would be. And there's no way she's going to tell her mother she's completely stumped on this case.

Sitting back up she snaps the cover to the book closed and throws it onto the chair by the TV stand across from the end of the bed. It slides off the chair and drops onto the gray carpeting below.

Hera checks the clock on the side table; it's a little past three now. She has to leave in about an hour, in time to catch Davies leaving work. Though she is beginning to think that he is just a dead end and there's a different place she should be looking for this demon.

Walking across the room, Hera picks back up the book and flips through the different sections on lesser demons. She tries to read through the definitions written by some long dead, ancient guardian. A lot of them act similarly, making it hard to identify one of their signatures from another, unlike more distinctive, powerful demon.

“Useless,” Hera hisses, dropping the book back onto the floor.

She shivers, hearing her mother's voice echo that word. Not that she's ever said that to Hera. Not out loud, at least. But who knows what her mother will say if she fails? She wasn't satisfied when Hera graduated third in her class from the Academy, or when she surpassed her trainers in hunting. Perhaps her mother won't be proud until she climbs the ranks and becomes a stiff, boring office Custos just like her.

With one last dirty look at the book, Hera turns and digs under the bed. Brushing aside the skirts of the covers, she locks her hand around the handle of the large case hidden beneath the bed and pulls it out. The sleek, black case nearly glows in the harsh overhead light. The weight is familiar to Hera as she heaves it onto the covers and rests a hand over the top.

Running her hand over the maroon lettering that says *Vesta*, she takes a deep breath. Just the feel of the case calms her down, like Vesta is sending her tranquil vibes.

Focusing on the magic she feels gripping the case, Hera releases the glamour on the case. Without the glamour, which makes the weapon inside appear to the human eye as a simple acoustic guitar, Hera would probably be sitting in an FBI interrogation room. Fortunately, the Custos' magic has evolved with the ages enough to get past airport checkpoints.

Feeling the magic ripple and vanish beneath her command, Hera unclasps the two clips at each end of the long case. Then she presses her thumb to the tiny oval piece centering the case. There's a slight hesitation before it clicks, signaling the lock has been disengaged.

Staring into the deep red of the gem that centers the dark silver handle, Hera runs her hand over the clean, black velvet of Vesta's sheath.

She is so caught up in trying to center herself, to calm her mind, that she doesn't hear her phone ringing until the third chime. Reaching over, she glances at the ID before accepting the call.

"Did my mom tell you to check up on me?" she asks as a greeting.

"I'm checking in because I care about you, sweetheart," Dale says from the other end of the line. He doesn't even sound slightly annoyed by her crudity.

"I'm doing just fine," she replies, turning around to look at her sword in its case one last time before closing the top.

"I know, I know. You're always fine. But...you know I worry about you. I can't help it," he replies and then pauses to talk to someone near him. "And you're going to have to get used to me worrying and checking up on you. I'll be doing it for the rest of our lives. If we aren't able to work cases together, anyways."

"My mom thinks you'll be a distraction if we partner together on cases," Hera says absently, looking at the delicate ring of black uranium on her left index finger.

She barely hears him say whatever he says next about her "lovely" mother. She's too busy remembering the moment he gave her the ring. Her stomach turns remembering how embarrassed she was in front of a dinner party of a bunch of snooty higher-up Custos. His words to her weren't a profession of love. *I promise to always take care of you*, he had said, *forever*.

As if she needs someone to take *care of her*. If anything, she should be worrying about him. Despite his reputable family, which made him an ideal match for Hera in her mother's eyes, he was tenth in their class of twenty-five at the Academy and has yet to be assigned a mission without a partner to assist him.

"You still there?" he asks.

Hera goes to answer but is cut off by the person he speaks to on the other end. She hears a murmur of something about a seat number and her cheeks heat up in anger.

"Are you getting on an airplane?!" she snaps, shaking her fist at the empty room in front of her.

"Don't be mad at your mother," he says to answer her question. "It was my idea. You haven't been checking in. It concerns me."

"I don't need to be checked up on," she says, rubbing her temple. She tries to calm herself down and says with a steadier voice, "I need to work a case on my own. To prove myself."

"You don't need to prove yourself. I know you're awesome at being a guardian," Dale says, his voice growing soft like he is trying to calm a child throwing a tantrum. "I'm just coming to be a shoulder for you. I'll stay in the sidelines. Promise."

Liar, Hera accuses silently. But if he's already coming that means her mother probably knows he is on his way. Which means that as soon as he lands in London her mother is going to accuse her of getting help on this basic case.

"Right, okay," Hera replies. "I'll see you tomorrow morning when you get in then."

“My flight was just called,” Dale says, and the victory is clearly distinguishable in his voice. “See you soon. Love you.”

“Yeah, see you,” Hera replies and hits the END CALL button.

Tossing her cellphone in the side table drawer, Hera begins getting dressed. She pulls on a black long sleeve shirt, dark jeans, and knee-high black boots. Then she pulls on a dark denim jacket, for added warmth and protection. Finally, she reopens Vesta’s case and lays it onto the white comforter.

It still being daylight, someone will obviously notice someone walking down the street with a sword strapped to her back. Pulling the foam out from the bottom of the case, she pulls the soft guitar cover out from inside. Using the thick cloth folded underneath the guitar cover, Hera gets to work making it look like there's actually a guitar inside. When she's satisfied with the look, she nestles Vesta between the lining, the case just long enough to fit the sword.

Finally, she lays her hand across the center of the case and concentrates on putting a glamour on Vesta’s magic. While no human will sense the magic radiating from the weapon, any demon (or other supernatural creature, like warlocks or psychics) would be able to detect the magic. When she’s satisfied the magic is nondetectable, she slings the case over her shoulder.

She knows that when Dale lands in London, all her credibility will go out the window. Her mother, along with all the Custos officials her mother has sway with, won't believe she can complete a case on her own. So, she needs to act now.

Leaving her cellphone in the side table, Hera exits her hotel room and heads towards the Underground. She has just enough time to get to Davies' office before he gets out of work.

Standing in the shadows of an apartment building, Hera turns her face slightly towards the wall to block her face from the night breeze. Standing outside, with rain drizzling down from the sky, for three hours has made her joints sore. Her jeans are damp, and her hair nearly drenched.

Blowing warm breath out of her mouth in a deep sigh causes a cloud to billow out and slowly dissipate in the air. The temperature has dropped considerably since she stopped here, having watched Oscar Davies walk from his apartment to a small corner pub called Oliver's.

Hera pats her jean pockets before remembering she left her cellphone back at her hotel room. *Why did people ever stop wearing watches?* Looking around, she tries to catch sight of a clock through a shop window. Unfortunately, most of the shops are dark by now, closed for the evening. With it being a Friday, the shops in this part of the city close around nine. *Which means that it's after ten now*, Hera figures.

"Please let last call be at eleven," she growls towards the bricks as a fierce gust of wind blows by.

Hera repositions the guitar case on her shoulder, reaching up to pat the top of the case where the zipper is. She had positioned the entrance to the case over her left

shoulder so she could easily unzip and pull out the sword with her right hand. She's so used to the weight of Vesta that it soothes her rather than adds to her discomfort.

The sound of music and lively chatter fills the streets suddenly as the door to Oliver's opens up. Hera steps back further into the shadows of the building. A woman, pale skinned with red hair, stumbles out of the door laughing and trying to keep her balance on the uneven pavement in her heels. Hera relaxes for a split second before a man follows the woman out of the pub and helps her regain her balance.

They walk up the street in the direction Davies lives. Keeping close to the buildings, trying to stay in the shadows, Hera follows Davies as he leads the woman away from the commotion of the pub.

With the woman so drunk she can barely stand up without support, walking two blocks takes them nearly ten minutes. Hera tries to keep her pace steady as she sticks to the shadows and stays close enough to act if need be.

Everything seems normal to her for the most part, though. Davies has stumbled a couple times, telling her he is probably intoxicated himself. Everything seems normal, except Hera can't help thinking about his girlfriend Mary-Jane. Did they break-up and this is his rebound? If that's the case, perhaps Davies really is a dead end and Hera is out of time.

When Davies turns another corner and then immediately takes a left, Hera nearly misses him, almost continuing up the road in the opposite direction. She instantly becomes more alert, scanning the shadows around her and the narrow road up ahead.

This isn't his way home.

About halfway up the street Hera is wondering if they are just heading to the woman's apartment instead of Davies'. They take another left turn and the road turns to a pedestrian walkway paved with cobblestones.

“How far away do you live?” the woman whines from up ahead, her speech so slurred the only reason Hera can make out what she's saying is because she's nearly screaming.

Hera's heart speeds up as she leans against the smaller, more decrepit buildings of this block. Though she knows she's still in the center of London, she can't help feeling like she's being led into the middle of nowhere.

Trying to map where the Underground is from here, Hera figures they're only about three blocks from where the other murders have occurred. Perhaps, if Davies truly is their monster, he's changed killing spots to throw off their hunt.

Too late for that, Hera thinks confidently, rubbing Vesta through the guitar case to soothe her uneasiness.

“I'm cold,” the woman whines, rubbing the dark pantyhose covering her legs.

Davies stops at the end of the street, still mostly supporting the woman, and inclines his head towards her. “I'm sorry.”

The way he says this, with such sadness and genuine remorse, sends Hera into full alert. Quicker than Hera could anticipate, Davies suddenly readjusts his hold on the woman, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and pulling her backwards.

Not caring if she is detected any longer, Hera reaches up and unzips the guitar case. Pulling Vesta's sheath out, she drops the cloth case and breaks into a run to catch up

with Davies as he rounds another left turn. His eyes grow wide as he sees her emerge from the shadows, probably noticing the long handle poking out from over her shoulder.

Hera stops in her tracks when she rounds the corner, scanning the empty dead end in front of her. She's nearly panicked, thinking she has lost them, when she glances down and sees a dark crater in the ground with a rusted sewer gate slid to the side.

Running over, she glances down into the hole and spies a slanted metal tube that leads down to the floor of the sewer. Hera's stomach turns, realizing it looks like some demented child's slide—but is perfect for sliding down heavy bodies.

Not wanting to waste precious time and risk losing the woman, Hera presses Vesta's sheath to the side of her leg and slides down. She grunts as she lands on the muddy patch at the bottom of the tube, scraping her elbow on the way down. Looking up, she takes in the narrow, curved ceilings and walls made of wide stones.

Up ahead she can see Davies turning the corner with the woman who is now kicking and screaming to get away. Hera runs a few feet down a small staircase with rails lining it, dropping down into about two feet of water. Trying not to think about what is in the water down here, Hera sprints through the water as fast as she can.

When she rounds the corner, she takes a few steps up onto a concrete pad. There is a metal door with a bunch of warnings and “Authorized Personnel” signs labeling it. Pushing the broken handle, Hera hastily continues her pursuit of Davies.

Past the door, the walls look similar to the sewer walls, but the floor is drier dirt edged with mud, telling Hera this is probably a tunnel for workers. When she doesn't see Davies or the woman up ahead her heart skips a beat, fearing she's lost them.

When she hears a muffled scream from down the tunnel, she picks up pace, taking a sharp right when it comes up and stepping back down into a wider sewer tunnel. In the far back wall, the tunnel cuts off, a complete dead end to the system. This room, of sorts, is slightly wider than the service tunnel, but narrow enough to be a tight battle area.

One look in the corner of the tunnel and Hera reaches up, unsheathing Vesta. The metallic material, a uranium-mixed substance that turns black when hardened into weapons like this, glints in the service light hanging from the ceiling. The gem in the handle begins to glow as Hera wields it, the two sub-blades that juts out from the tang flexing with the flow of magic.

Davies is standing over the woman, who is pushed to the ground on her knees, writhing and crying. Over her begging cries is the hissing sound from the demon towering in the corner.

Hera estimates it to be about eight or nine feet tall. With thick black fur and a giant pear-shaped body, an elongated face with sharp teeth jutting out, and glowing red eyes, it certainly is the demonic version of a rat.

Its glowing eyes focus on Hera and her sword, a grayish-brown tail, maybe five feet long, sways behind, sharp spikes like claws poking out of the ends.

“If you run now, it won't go after you. It has her,” Davies says, getting Hera's attention. He seems to barely notice the weapon she holds, too concerned with protecting the demon.

I was wrong, he wasn't the demon, Hera realizes, glancing between him and the demon, *he was just feeding it*. Not unheard of in the Custos world, but demons tend to pick out their own meals.

“If you hurry, you can get her to safety while I kill this thing,” Hera growls at him, keeping her eyes on the demon that is now completely focused on her.

She can see drool puddling at its mouth and falling, evaporating in clouds of mist as it hits the sewer floor.

“I had no choice,” Davies shouts, gripping the woman beneath him as she attempts to break from his grip. “It has my girlfriend, Mary-Jane. It said it would give her back if I satisfied its appetite.”

Hera's stomach drops as the demon lets out a gravelly, long chuckle that sounds more like broken glass shaken in a metal can. A rouse to get Davies to bring it more meals, Hera realizes. Demons like this one don't have the desire or power to entrap its prey.

“It doesn't have your girlfriend, Davies,” she tells him, adjusting her grip on her sword to prepare for an assault. “*It ate her.*”

Despair and disbelief consume Davies' face, his face paling as he shakes his head. “No. *No!* It promised me. I just had to satisfy it...”

“It was using you,” Hera says as realization finally shines in Oscar Davies' eyes. “To feed. It ate Mary-Jane, and it was going to eventually eat you. You've been sacrificing innocent people for *nothing.*”

Oscar Davies' sobs, shaking with anguish and regret, as he falls to his knees and allows the drunk woman to scurry into the closest corner.

As the attention of the demon is caught by its retreating dinner, Davies' cries are drowned out by the blood rushing in Hera's ears as she shoots forward, sword raised high. She doesn't expect much of a fight from powerless and primitive demon, letting pure disgust drive her need to extinguish this thing from her world.

It barely moves as she barrels towards it, swinging her sword down. When it roars and attacks with its mouth she jumps to the side and swings Vesta downward. It avoids her assault and before Hera knows what hits her, it swings out with its tail and knocks her feet out from under her.

Hera hits the hard ground on her back, a few feet in front of the entrance to the tunnel, sword still poised for defense. The tail shoots out again and she rolls, holding Vesta high over her head to keep from impaling herself. At her most vulnerable, the demon rushes forward, going to slam into her.

All of Hera's formal training goes out the window as she rolls again to avoid being crushed beneath its giant body. With only a couple feet of space, Hera rolls right into the side of the sewer wall. Her hand whacks against the stone, causing the sword to vibrate in her grip.

Hera grapples to keep control with her hand stinging, but watches in horror as Vesta slips out of her palm and slides a couple of feet away. It only takes a second of frozen shock to give the demon an opening. Swaying to the side, it towers over her and goes for one last assault.

Hera hesitates, and knows that it is the last chance she'll get to hesitate. She throws her arms up in an attempt to defend herself from its death blow. The tail comes up just as she sees a flash of movement from her peripherals.

Her screams mirror the drunk woman's as the demon sinks its teeth into Oscar Davies' shoulder. Hera swears he cries out for his girlfriend just before the demon inclines its head and snaps the man's neck.

Hera's instincts beg her to jump up and go for Vesta, to finish off the mus. But all she can think about is that Davies' death is her fault. He just saved her life when she was there to save him. It is a guardian's job to protect victims of demonic attacks. She failed him, she failed herself, and everything she stands for.

Get up and fight, a voice shouts suddenly through her head—not her own conscience, but the encouraging voice of Uncle Mauvis.

Using her arms to thrust herself upwards, Hera regains her footing and collects her weapon in one motion. The demon barely has time to toss the lifeless body of Davies to the side before Vesta pierces its flesh.

It bellows in pain as Hera plunges her blade into its gut. With all the rage and guilt inside her heart, she angles the sword up and shoves it up to the hilt. The two extensions jolt forward with her silent command, releasing the magic held within Vesta and extinguishing the demonic force from within the creature.

As the body of the demon slumps to the ground, Hera drops to her knees, barely having the strength to keep her sword from slamming into the ground. In front of her,

positioned on the ground for Hera to observe his face, the dead body of Oscar Davies stares back at her.

Why did you do it? Hera wants to scream at him, her arms shaking violently.

Observing the forever frozen face, Hera examines the final expression on Davies' face before his demise: overwhelming grief.

For Mary-Jane, perhaps. But more than likely he was consumed with the knowledge Hera slung at him; he killed those people by bringing them to the demon. And his act of heroism, to save the person trying to save his final victim, was his way of trying to make amends.

With a body on the ground, a scared and scarred woman whimpering in the corner, Hera bows her head, her shoulders shaking as she holds in a sob.

Nine Hours Later

Hera watches the buildings go by as the cab crawls to a stop at a traffic light. Looking up towards the sky, Hera notices there isn't a cloud in the sky. It's the first time she's seen a blue sky since she has been in the city.

"Your fiancé is not going to be happy when he learns you ditched him in London." Mauvis smiles towards his niece, inclining his head. A gentle way to try to get her to talk for the first time since she called him late last night and asked him to help clean up her mess.

He'd showed up, wordless and judgeless, with his friend Rilee: a warlock. They'd wiped the woman's memory and dropped her at a hospital, letting her believe she was

mugged walking home from the pub. Oscar Davies' body would never be found, Rilee has assured Hera. Then they'd left the dead body of the mus, half disintegrated, the remains on their way back to its own realm.

Hera remembers going back to her hotel to find Dale waiting for her. She had kicked him out of her room after telling him she'd finished the job, promising to meet him for breakfast.

She'd agreed to join her uncle on his early flight back to New England, him *conveniently* having another ticket handy, and ducked out of the hotel before six.

"Thank you."

"It was a simple spell," he says with a shrug, clearly assuming she was referring to the help Rilee had handed out selflessly—Hera was well aware he was the friend her uncle had come to see, though he was obviously there more to lend a hand if she needed him and Rilee was a convenient coverup.

Hera raises an eyebrow at him which he returns with a grin. She wonders if he knows she wasn't referring to the spell, or the powder he sprinkled to dissolve Oscar Davies' body. She knows that it was truly his voice telling her to fight down in the sewer, not a figment of her imagination; he'd probably asked Rilee for magical help to contact his niece spiritually (something Custos magic doesn't extend to).

He'll never admit it though, Hera knows. He would rather let her believe she did it on her own; he's always wanted her to believe in herself, in her strength.

"Your mother will be proud," he tells her as the cab begins crawling again.

Hera scoffs and continues looking out the window. "No, she won't be."

But her mother will have to admit that Hera is capable of doing things on her own. She killed that demon on her own and saved that woman. She's proud of that, even though she'll never forgive herself for losing Oscar. More than anything, this mission taught her how to survive her life as a guardian, despite Dale or her mother's attempt to prove her incapable. Her stumble that cost Davies his life will only push her to work harder and save more lives—it won't make up for his life, but she'll be sure to spend her life honoring his sacrifice. She's no longer going to roll over and let people hold her back from accomplishing what she's capable of.

Looking down at the ring on her index finger, remembering that moment of weakness when she'd said yes to please her mother, Hera slides it off and tucks it into her carry-on at her feet.

Dagger of Deviation

“Not one,” Malcolm huffs, yanking his boot out of a deep puddle of mud. “Not one stupid fae.”

Blake trudges through the muddy floor of the forest as rain comes down in a steady stream, keeping an eye on his partner Malcolm's back as he goes. Attempting to wipe a fallen leaf off his face, Blake slides a sodden hand across his dripping face. Growling at the loose oak leaf, he rips it to shreds and lets it fall to the ground like snow.

“What am I supposed brag about when I get back to camp tomorrow, empty handed?” Malcolm continues to complain.

“Well, it won't be about your clean boots,” Blake scoffs, readjusting the sack slung over his shoulder, trying to hide his discomfort with humor.

Malcolm scoffs something obscene and continues ahead, sending bits of dirt and shrubbery flying over the dense forest floor. Blake shifts a few feet to the right to avoid getting his uniform any filthier, now standing a good several feet from Malcolm.

Blake tries not to grimace at Malcolm too openly, otherwise his partner might understand just how much he disgusts him.

Blake has always hated the similarities between himself and the older man—they both have dark hair, brown eyes, and deeply sun-kissed skin from growing up along the ocean coast city of Gillich. Sure, Malcolm is considerably stockier than Blake, with longer, straighter hair and lighter hazel eyes to Blake's nearly black ones, but there's still enough of a similarity to make Blake cringe.

The last two and a half years since Blake finished his training has been a struggle. He'd been partnered with Malcolm, who was just going into his second eight-year contract with the Queen's Army, right away. They've been stationed at the boarder of the Forbidden Forest, now renamed the Royal Hunting Grounds, for almost a year now.

Queen Carissa Maycott has recently issued a decree: round up the fae. The Forbidden Forest, a plot of several hundred acres of forest nestled into this split of land between the massive twin expanses of the Nephitis River, had been home to thousands of magical creatures. The fae, immortal beings similar in appearance to humans, oversaw and governed the lands. Now, the queen has decided the fruitful lands are property of the Mythica crown and therefore she is within her right to claim them.

It's now the mission of her soldiers to scour the newly claimed forest and capture any fae remaining in the protected land.

"Maybe we should head back to the camp, replenish our supplies," Blake suggests, glancing up at the setting sun. "We could both use some soap, too."

They'd been searching out in the woods for two days now, since they received their mission from their commanding general. Malcolm is over the moon excited for this mission, but Blake cringes at the very thought of coming across a fae. Knowing they've been ordered to return to the camp every couple of days to replenish supplies, Blake is yearning to back track and get back to camp, where it's unlikely they'll encounter any fae. Blake doesn't want to hunt and capture fae. He could care less about the glory they'd receive or the duty he has to his monarch. The thought of imprisoning something that just wanted to remain in the home they've inhabited for centuries...

“Head back almost a day early, empty handed?” Malcolm turns to glare at his partner before unsheathing his sword and whacking it brutally against the closest tree trunk. “Not a chance. I'm not giving up yet. There's still some daylight left.”

Blake shifts uneasily, mostly at the thought of mentioning to Malcolm if he keeps beating his sword like that it's going to be uselessly dull, and slows his pace to fall further behind.

“I could tie some sticks together with twine, rub it around in the dirt, and call it some kind of magical talisman mumbo jumbo. You wouldn't tell on me, would you? That way I wouldn't come back with nothing to show off,” Malcolm says, stopping by a cluster of flourishing bushes to pee.

Blake lets his silence be answer enough, grabbing a thick branch off the ground and pulling out his dagger. He spins the tip into the bark, testing the blade to see if it needs to be sharpened—it peels the wood back without hesitation, dropping thin shavings onto Blake's boots.

He's always made sure, since he was gifted the dagger by his mother once he completed his army training, to take good care of the knife. For just a moment, Blake allows himself the memory of his mother saying how proud she was of him for being so brave.

Staring at the gift from his mother, trailing behind Malcolm as he continues his self-pity, Blake begins to get lost in his memories. Remembering years back, before Carissa Maycott took the throne, when fae could come and go into the capital as they pleased: to trade, shop, explore and entertain, even live.

He remembers walking down the street in center Gillich, the midsummer sun heating the cobblestones so fiercely he could feel the sting through his thin flats. He was ten, still young enough to not be ashamed to hold his father's hand while they walked along.

His mother had stopped in a nearby shop to buy another hat, so his father had stopped to watch a fae play a small wooden, handcrafted instrument with several small holes carved into the top and side, and a metal mouth piece to blow into.

The fae had been one of the immortals, tall and thin, but seemingly human. She'd been so young in appearance, no lines or blemishes of age to be seen, but something in the way her cool blue eyes looked through the crowd, not at it, told Blake she was the oldest creature in the city.

Looking up at his father, Blake had noticed how the sickly, beautiful man had been entranced by the simple melody slipping from the instrument. He'd stared at wonder at the gentle man that had taught him how to wood carve and dance to the beat of the waves against the ocean shore, and watched a tear slip down his cheek—as if his father knew something about the immortal he did not; as if the song she had mastered meant something far more impactful than any other human crowding the street could understand.

When the song ended, his father had dropped a considerable tip into the delicate blue slipper waiting at the base of the fae's stool, only to turn and encounter his mother's disapproving scowl.

“Your father has always been meek-souled, Blake,” his mother had whispered to him that afternoon as they'd walked back towards their townhouse. “But you're like me, right, darling? The world is hard. You'll need a hard heart.”

He'd smiled and winked at her, as he had so many times in his childhood, and as he continued to do throughout his adulthood. Knowing his mother had been disappointed she couldn't have any more children, that she'd made the mistake of taking a mate later in life and losing her opportunity to have a daughter to continue the family name, he was always out to impress her. All he'd ever wanted to do was assure his mother he was worthy of her appreciation, of her name.

At that time, Blake had pretended like he knew what she meant by being like her. It took him years to see she saw Blake's father as a shamefully weak person and she saw herself, in comparison, to be strong and resilient. She believed what everyone said about the 'lesser creatures' of the world, that she was better than any fae simply for being human.

But the tear that slipped down his father's cheek that afternoon, though certainly not the only tear that he saw fall from his father's eyes, haunted him. The look his father gave that immortal woman, who was so much alike and unlike their kind, replayed in his memory and dreams—

“You deaf, or what?”

Blake drops the branch in his hand with a start, taking a step back as Malcolm comes barreling towards him and clamps a dirty hand over his mouth. Cringing at the

rough, calloused hand that scraps across his mouth, Blake pushes his partner away and examined his wide-eyed appearance.

“What is it?” he asks, making sure to whisper as softly as Malcolm.

Malcolm just nods in a particular direction and beckons Blake to follow. A few paces behind Malcolm, Blake walks swiftly on the forest floor, remembering his training and avoiding twigs and large bunches of dried plants or leaves, doing what he can to be light-footed. As they ascend a small foothill, he can hear the steady beat of a flowing stream.

When they get to the top of the hill, Malcolm sucks in an excited breath.

Slicing through the thickly wooded area is a stream about three feet wide, but that bends off into the woods in an endless line. Among all the thriving plant life growing from the edge of the water, a thrashing pixian struggles to untangle a wing from an entwined vine.

Pixians, Blake recalls, are the more petite of the fae and far less powerful beings. Though all fae have magical powers that the soldiers have been cautioned they can wield in deceptive and sly ways, Pixians are less threatening. They're less known for their magic and better known for the pointed wings of all colors and patterns that protrude from their backs.

She looks young, not appearing any older than a thirteen or fourteen-year-old human girl, standing about four and a half feet tall. Her skin is a light purple, as if it's made of delicate iris petals. She's mostly bare, thin and delicate limbs on display, wrapped in a dark green cloth that covers her midsection and thighs.

“She's stuck,” Blake finds himself saying.

The tiny creature whirls, falling to her knees and hissing viciously at the soldiers standing on the hill above her. Now noticing the danger, she digs her pale fingers into the vines and yanks. The vines hold tight to her mint colored wing, the sharp thorns digging into the delicate webbing and causing fine tears.

“I know,” Malcolm booms, whacking Blake abruptly on the bicep. “What luck, right?!”

Blake was thinking the same thing, but not nearly in the same context.

Standing at the top of the hill, Blake watches Malcolm slide down the bank with ease, already pulling his sack off his back. Blake doesn't move, glancing down at the dagger he just realized is still clutches in his palm.

Glancing up, Blake makes contact with the black eyes of the pixian. She is looking between him and Malcolm. At first, Blake simply thinks she's examining their tan trousers, white tunic, and yellow and purple sash that make up their Queen's Army uniform.

However, as he holds her stare, he realizes she's looking at him too intensely, like he's someone familiar to her. Her eyes are wide in shock like she's come across an old friend she thought she'd never see again, or a rival she thought she'd already conquered.

Pulling his eyes from the pixian's, Blake realizes his hands are still shaking. Though the rain has slowed to a drizzle now, he tries to tell himself it's the chill of his wet clothes. Swallowing, he watches the hand holding his dagger until the shaking calms.

Then he manages to pry his eyes up in time to watch Malcolm pull on his black leather gloves. Blake knows his partner is pulling out the chains from a thick woven pouch before he sees the bluish gray metal gleaming in the colors of the setting sun.

The pixian hisses again, this time leaning towards the flowing water beneath her as she watches the hulking soldier creeping close to her. Her eyes, completely black pupils with small corners of cream surrounding them, grow wide as she glares at the chains clenched in Malcolm's gloved hands. It's no secret that fae-rings, as they are called, are laced with wolfsbane: deadly to humans, and suppressive to any fae magic.

Blake, watching Malcolm test the weight of the chains in his hands, thankful they'd been given strict orders to restrain and return. Even if every bone in Malcolm was screaming to end the creature's life, he's too dedicated to the army to go against an order.

"It's hurt," Malcolm points out, not a drop of sympathy dripping from his lips. "Maybe it will just sleep until we get it back to the camp."

She hisses for a third time, her thinly pointed, glowing white teeth bared in warning. Her delicate fingers are still gripped in the vines holding her in place, but she has stopped yanking. Focused wholly on the soldier standing only a few feet from her, she kneels in the mud, her free wing beating slightly in the wind as if it yearns to break for the sky.

"*Please.*" The word escapes her mouth like a soft breath that dances along an evening breeze. The word is clearly unfamiliar on her tongue, like she knows the common tongue but has yet had the need to use it.

Blake begins shaking, still several feet away on the top of the hill, his dagger wobbling in the open air. His breath catches in his throat, his chest tightening pitifully, that tear his father shed for this creature's immortal brethren haunting his vision for a moment.

Malcolm makes a sound, like someone retching up their breakfast after a mead-induced night, and lunges. The forest seems to grow silent around them, even the breeze stopping short abruptly and the rain refusing to fall any longer, as Malcolm spins the pixian and entwines her arms in the chains. She cries out, a high-pitched sound like two porcelain cups clinking together, as the links dig into her arms.

Once the chains are secured around her, Malcolm steps back and pockets the gloves. Walking back over to his sack on the ground, the vines still holding the creature in place, he begins searching for something else in his gear.

"A little help would be nice," Malcolm barks at Blake, glaring up before continuing to rummage through his belongings.

Blake scoffs, "I thought you'd want to take all the glory."

Finally, he rips his boots from the mud and slides down to the small clearing. When he walks around Malcolm towards the pixian, now chained and kneeling in defeat, she hisses softly at him. Despite the hissing, he can see the fear shining in her dark eyes, her muscles tense beneath the skin.

He holds up his dagger slightly, noticing her eyes watching it carefully. She winces at the sight of the dagger, maybe even at the royal seal gleaming at the top of the hilt, causing Blake to hesitate.

It's such a human gesture, he thinks, wincing in fear and rage.

Reaching over the shrub she's still tangled in, Blake keeps an eye on her bared teeth. Using the dagger, he slices through the vines that are brutally gripping her ethereal wing. As soon as it is freed, the wing twitches and shakes slightly, the loose vine bits and thorns falling to the ground by her feet.

Blake meets her eyes, a look of mutual hesitation and confusion crossing between them, as she twitches her wings, letting them slap together twice.

And then she cries out as Malcolm appears at her side, gripping her bicep entirely around with his broad hand. "What were you thinking?" he hisses at Blake, who feels his face flush. "What do you think these things are for, visual appeal? It could have flown away, chains or not!"

Blake takes a step back, no longer able to look at the pixian or his partner, and instead watches his dagger disappear slowly into its sheath. "I wasn't thinking." He couldn't bring himself to even utter the word *sorry*.

"Duh," Malcolm replies dismissively, reaching up with a clunky metal clamp. The rubber pieces on either end of the device, that are coated in wolfsbane, bite into the thin material of her wings as Malcolm pries them together and clamps them in place.

With the pixian now bound completely, with no obvious chance to fight back or escape, Malcolm yanks her by the elbow to her feet. Grinning, he looks over at Blake and says, "Guess you were right. We should head back to camp today."

“We should have kept moving,” Malcolm growls, dropping down into the dirt by the weak fire.

They'd managed to scrounge up some well-covered logs that had survived the rain and made a fire to heat up their beans and cured meat. Blake finishes setting up his tent, only a few feet from Malcolm's, and sits down by the fire.

The drenched ground immediately soaks into his pants, making him regret the decision not to crouch instead. Malcolm seems unbothered, however, as he motions to a bowl sitting by the fire. Blake picks up the metal bowl and spoons a few mouthfuls of cold beans into his mouth.

“It's getting dark,” Blake says, chewing the last bits in his mouth. “Who knows what else is lurking in the shadows out here at night. We got lucky with this one.”

He motions to the pixian sitting by Malcolm's tent, chained and gagged, watching them both carefully. Malcolm had chained her to the ring of his tent and gagged her when she continued to hiss and growl at him.

“Come on, me and you could have handled it regardless,” Malcolm says, beating his chest primitively. “We're soldiers of the Queen's Army, the best trained fighters in the world.”

Blake shoves another spoonful of food into his mouth to avoid having to call Malcolm's bluff. Though, as the soldier puffs up his chest and gives a snide look in the direction of the pixian chained and at his mercy, Blake realizes Malcolm probably believes it—he probably believes that because his monarch has been so successful in her endeavors that she's reigning supreme over the world, to be feared and loved by all; he

probably believes that their reign of terror on creatures that they look down upon is honorable and not abhorrent.

“We should feed her,” Blake says, nodding towards the fae glowering at them with an equal amount of contempt and fear. When Malcolm scowls and begins shaking his head Blake adds, “Unless you want to carry *it* all the way back to camp tomorrow morning because it's too weak to walk.”

Malcolm rolls his eyes, gives a dismissive grunt, and stares into the measly flames licking the air. Taking that as a pass, Blake ruffles through his food pouch and pulls out an apple. Taking a dull paring knife with him, he goes over to the pixian and kneels a good couple feet away from her. With his free hand, he pulls the gag out of her mouth. He hesitates when she bares her teeth, letting out a low warning hiss.

Catching Malcolm watching him out of the corner of his eye, Blake nearly reaches back over and puts the gag back in. But he can't help imagining how he would feel bound and gagged, terrified, not knowing whether or not he'll live another day, hungry and exhausted.

Using the paring knife, he cuts off about half the apple and then slices the chunk in half. Holding it by the very end, he holds the slice out towards her mouth. She hesitates, watching him closely, and then eyeing the apple skeptically. However, whether she chooses to trust him or is just too hungry to deny it, she leans in and snatches the piece up. He expected her to take half in her mouth, but she yanks the whole piece from his fingers and chews fiercely, her sharp teeth slicing through the skin easier than the knife.

She allows him to feed her the rest of the slice in the same manner, but when he reaches over to feed her the other half of the apple she grimaces and turns her face, another low hiss slipping out.

I thought pride was just a human trait, he thinks as he stands up and tosses the remainder of the fruit into the forest for the critters of the night to fight over.

“We should get some sleep,” Blake tells Malcolm.

Malcolm doesn't argue. In fact, he doesn't say anything at all as he crawls into his tent and kicks the flaps closed behind him.

Blake debates kicking dirt into the fire to put it out, but he looks up at the cloudy sky with no signs of the moon or stars. She'd be all alone, cold and in the dark. Not that it would matter much—Blake's well aware those predatory eyes adjust and see in the dark. But, again, he can't help imagining how he would feel in this situation.

Leaving her gag laying on the ground, Blake ducks into his tent and collapses on the thin blanket covering the damp ground.

In the grogginess of partial sleep, Blake thinks it's the shivers traveling down his cold arms that wake him in the night. Groaning, he pulls his legs up to his chest, trying to fend off the bitter bite of the wind's chill slipping through the old tent.

Then he hears the whispers. Opening his eyes to stare into the darkness, he listens to the sounds of voices drifting through the night.

It takes a couple of minutes of straining to understand one of the voices is certainly *not* Malcolm. Once the shock and confusion pass, Blake realizes the whispers aren't even in the common tongue.

His blood runs cold as he lays there listening to the eerie calmness of the voices. Though he doesn't recognize the language, he can make out that the voices sound low, gravelly, and anciently calm like the ocean at dawn.

Laying there for a time, he waits for the whispers to die down.

And waits.

And waits, until he's shaking with anticipation and concern for the lingering voices.

Finally, tugging on his boots in the corner of the tent, Blake crouches in his entryway and grips the edge of the door flap. The voices continue in a steady beat, some stopping and letting one whisper on, and then many of them speaking at once.

Leaning over his belongings, Blake pulls out his dagger and tenses as he exits the tent.

The fire is mere embers, hissing softly at the rain drops that fall unevenly from the sky. Blake looks around, still crouched and on the defense. But there is no one. The darkness of the forest in the early morning hours, when night still lurks, glares back at him, soundless.

Swallowing hard, he holds up his dagger and turns to the fae still chained to Malcolm's tent. She's sitting in the same spot they left her in, but her head is tilted back, her mouth slightly cracked mid-whisper.

Sucking in a breath, Blake stops as her eyelids snap open and she looks over at him. A deep, vicious hiss escapes her mouth as she glares at him with wide, black eyes.

“Who are you talking to?” he asks, half whispering, but having slept around Malcolm long enough to know he sleeps far too heavily for an on-guard soldier.

The pixian looks at him cocking her head, true surprise written on her face. “You...couldn't have heard them.” Her voice is low and hesitant, clearly still uncomfortable using the language.

Blake swallows, holding out his dagger and watching a couple raindrops slip off the blade. He listens, waiting to hear more of the voices—but they've grown silence.

“Who. Were. You. Talking. To,” he barks, again examining the shade of trees around them. “Are they gone now? How did they find us?”

She stares at him for another silent minute, lips twitching. “They are neither close nor far, always with me and never by my side.” She offers him the cryptic answer and then smirks, eyeing him warily. “But you could not have heard them.”

“What do you mean? How could I *not have* heard them?” he replies, eyeing her and then eyeing the opening to Malcolm's tent.

“Only fae can hear the whispers of the ancient ones,” she tells him, standing up and making the chain around her ankle rattle. “Or, at the very least, humans with fae blood.”

“What?” Blake scowls at her, still glancing around for the culprits. “I'm not fae.”

“Some of our kind, the immortals more similar in appearance to your kind, used to mate frequently in the Time of the Free Folk. Your ancestors must have been children

of one of the offspring of half-fae peoples. It's depleted, but we must still be a part of your blood for you to hear the ancient voices.”

Blake sucks in a breath, his gut clenching like he was just sucker punched. His hand shakes, but he holds steady to the dagger he has outstretched.

Shaking his head, he whispers, “No. *No*. You're a crazy, manipulative little thing.”

“All may be true,” she says, her voice just loud enough to catch on the wind and carry to him. “But I speak only the truth of your ancestry. You are part fae, human. Tell any one of your more informed city-dwellers of what you have witnessed, how you heard my people on the winds, and they will burn you right along with us.”

Blake's breath becomes uneven at the mention of other people knowing about this encounter. Is she telling the truth? Is he really part fae? *Impossible*. But if it is the truth, if hearing those whispers means he isn't entirely human, she's right. He would be imprisoned, stripped of his station, maybe even executed for the actions of his ancestors.

The sharp metal of the dagger's hilt digs into his palm as Blake takes a step forward. The pixian eyes him, stepping back and making her chains clink together. She glances at the tent where Malcolm sleeps and back at Blake inching towards her.

“No one can know about this,” Blake says, pointing the knife towards her.

“You know now,” she says, looking between him and the blade. “It is a part of you.”

Don't, something whispers in his ear and he stiffens. He wants to believe that it was the pixian, but her lips did not move. He's hearing something else, something he shouldn't be hearing, that he can be killed for hearing.

"You are different from these others," she says as he takes another step forward. "You care. You do not want to be cruel to my kind. I have seen that in you."

She knows I'm part-fae, Blake tells himself, *I can't let her tell anyone else. Especially not Malcolm.*

Don't, the voice whispers in his ear. He hesitates, wiping the damp hair from his face and blinking the rain away that has begun to fall more steadily now. *Don't, brother.*

Brother.

Blake's hand continues to shake as he tries to hold steady to the knife. He can here Malcolm shifting in his tent and wonders if he'll wake before he can make his decision. Blake takes a deep breath, taking another step forward.

You don't want to do this, the ancient, terrible, and magnificent voices whisper in his ear again.

Another step forward and the pixian hisses viciously, though he knows it's more out of fear than aggression. Angling the dagger downwards, Blake takes another step forward, which brings him nearly within reaching distance, and looks right into her eyes, the fear piecing through the darkness of the night making Blake's blood run cold.

"You are not the monster," she says, nearly gasping as he closes more space between them. "*They* are."

He's only two feet from her now. If he lunged forward, he could capture her in his grasp and slide the dagger across her throat before she can make a sound.

The voices stop whispering to him, the only sounds around him being the rain hitting the tent tops and rustling the leaves. But, before he can make another move, he remembers again.

He remembers that tear sliding down his father's cheek. He remembers the sadness and understanding in his father's eyes, an unspoken connection that his father understood, despite that he probably didn't even know his ancestry.

He remembers his mother gifting him this dagger, ordering him to serve the queen at all costs. *You can make a difference*, she'd told him. *You're strong*.

Stumbling back, Blake tries to shove the sight of that tear on his father's cheek out of his mind.

Tries, and fails. Blake now knows what that song had meant to his father; he'd felt that unspoken and ancient bond.

Before he can think further about what it could cost him if word got out about his ancestry, the dagger slips from his hand and lands on the ground beside the dying embers of the fire.

The pixian watches him, her purple lips trembling with anticipation. He takes a couple deep breaths, holding her stare for a moment longer.

He can't. He can't kill her. He also can't let Malcolm drag her back to the camp to be punished or executed. If he can't imagine himself going through such horrors, how could he let that happen to someone else who doesn't deserve it?

Deciding to be the loving person his father always knew he was, and vowing never again to be the brutal man his mother pushed him to be, he leans down and slowly enters Malcolm's tent. His partner lays on his back, snoring into the air, his spare shirt half thrown over his face.

Looking around, Blake sees the keys for the chain locks gleaming inside Malcolm's right boot. Cringing at the moisture inside the shoe, Blake slowly and cautiously pulls the keys out. Watching the steady breathing of his partner still in deep rest, he walks backwards out of the tent.

The look of relief on the pixian's face when he emerges with the keys has him getting to work hastily. Careful not to touch the poisonous metal, he unlocks the chain around her ankle first, then walks around her to unclasp the ones binding her arms. She even allows him to gently take the clamp off her wings.

He takes a step back as she spins around, facing him. He holds his breath, waiting to see if she'll either rip his head off his shoulders or simply thank him and be on her way.

Instead, she says, "I will never forget this. Our ancestors will never forget this. You will never forget this."

He nods, a shiver running down his spine. Not out of fear or rage or confusion, like before, but out of pure awe. He's no longer ashamed to be sympathetic or fascinated with the fae of his world.

"Morcades," she says slowly, and he doesn't have to ask to know that's her name. A gift, he realizes; one more genuine and amazing than any his mother gave him.

“Blake Rosen.” He doesn't know why he tells her, or what use his name would be to her, but he finds it slipping from his lips.

A smile curls over Morcades' lips, a glimmer shining in her eyes where fear and rage had been residing. Despite her appearance, Blake knows she's no child. The wisdom reflected in her eyes tells him she's old and knowledgeable; she might even be old enough to have witnessed the intermingling between his human and fae ancestors.

Holding her purple palm out flat, Blake watches in amazement as a dull blue light begins to glow in the open air above her hand. Slowly, the light fades, and in her hand sits a trinket. It's made mainly out of thin twigs, burnt at the edges, bent and tied into the shape of a star. In the center is a thick strip of tightly woven grass.

Smiling in a mischievous and sincere way, Morcades leans down and lays the talisman on the ground in the center of where the chains lay.

And as he watches the petite, beautiful creature turn and disappear into the shadows of the early morning dawn, he understands. She was there, listening to him and Malcolm. She had feigned shock to see them, possibly, but she'd heard Malcolm's roars of rage at not finding something to earn his glory. This useless mass of twigs and grass is to appease his partner, who will surely be enraged to find his glory has escaped him.

Leaving the trinket right where she left it, Blake picks up his mother's dagger off the ground. It's dirty, caked with mud, but he doesn't move to clean it. He debates burying it or chucking it into the woods, but he knows Malcolm will notice its absence. He uses it too much for his partner to not notice it missing.

Deciding he can live with carrying the dagger around for the duration of his contract, Blake tosses it into his tent with the rest of his belongings. Then he gets to work, rearranging the chains with his feet and laying Malcolm's boot out across the threshold of his tent.

With the pixian having only been a couple feet from the tent, it's believable that she got the better of him and managed to get the keys from the boot. Not a perfect set up, but Blake is convinced Malcolm's intelligence will lack the ability to sort out the issues. He probably won't even question where the talisman had come from, just grateful to have proof of his find.

Examining the scene, to make sure he hasn't left any obvious errors, Blake is satisfied it'll cause little questions. More likely Malcolm will just sulk and curse for the next couple days.

Ducking back into his tent, Blake waits for the sun to rise and hear Malcolm's enraged roars.

He waits, just like he waited for those voices to stop.

He waits, like he'll wait out the last couple months of his contract to the army.

He waits, knowing soon enough he'll be able to burn his uniform and that damned sash that marks him as property to a murderous queen.

As he waits, he remembers that tear.

He remembers that tear like he'll remember these acts committed before the early morning light broke over the horizon.